

Pauli Saloranta

YOU AND ME, HIM AND HER, US AND THEM: WE ARE THE CITY

The European questions in democracy affect Helsinki and its inhabitants in many different ways. Our city is remaking itself as new urban lifestyles and ways to participate are emerging.

Helsinki is going through some interesting times. The city's population is growing and changing more than it has in living memory. Local lifestyles, habits and experiences are becoming increasingly diverse, as are notions of what defines a good city. Meanwhile, on the other hand, social media are narrowing the exchange of ideas with people outside one's filter bubble. Urban sprawl, which has been the norm for a hundred years now, is giving way to denser inner-city development. Stricter energy efficiency standards are now required in order to achieve climate neutrality. The city administration is looking for a new role to play, while residents want – and are laying claim to – more of a say in local affairs. Interaction between local government and citizens is increasing, as are the demands on the quality thereof. New ways of influencing public policy, above and beyond traditional representative decision-making and the established preparatory committees. The question is: How can we live together and settle matters despite possible differences of opinion?

Municipal reforms give citizens more say

In 2016, Helsinki's City Council took three important steps towards a more interactive democracy. For one thing, the mayor is now politically responsible and elected for four years coterminously with City Council. For another, what used to be 31 different municipal offices and agencies were grouped together into four divisions with corresponding commissions. The Council also voted to create a new model of participation and interaction that will standardize the city's participatory practices as well as adopting practices based on past experiments and making use of new approaches such as city-wide participatory budgeting. The point of all these reforms is to give residents more of a say in municipal affairs while streamlining the workings of city government by dismantling administrative "silos".

Significantly, this model of participation and interaction in Helsinki was co-developed with a wide range of individual residents and communities. The underlying principles of participation and interaction were set forth in the city's administrative guidelines:

1. To use the know-how and expertise of the city's inhabitants, communities, businesses and users in the development of municipal services
2. To enable residents to act on their own initiative and
3. To create opportunities for citizen participation on an equal footing.

These guiding principles will increasingly open up the entire city administration to participation by the people of Helsinki. In 2017 the City Council voted to implement and finance this new model.

The policy of Helsinki is participation to be understood broadly as part and parcel of every aspect of city life, not as separate or isolated efforts or as a bonus. From the point of view of the city's officials, participation should not be something added to "business as usual", but an approach in which the citizens' know-how and initiative and according equal value to their input helps officials do their jobs better, more easily, more efficiently or more effectively.

Helsinki promotes multifaceted citizen participation

While we in Helsinki are already doing more than required under the current Finnish laws on local government, we want to keep making progress in citizen participation in a total of ten domains. In the provision of municipal services, a number of different approaches have been used for some time now, ranging from consumer panels and cartographic surveys to collaborative urban planning. Seven borough liaisons and three business liaisons have been hired to develop participation in the city's various districts and companies, respectively. Every year, thousands of residents volunteer for jobs in various areas ranging from parks to cultural centres. We are continually opening more of city's premises for the public to use - the facilities can be booked using an electronic reservation system. We adhere to the principle of open access to information, which applies to everything from Council decisions to real-time public transport timetables. We promote online participation by training senior citizens in computer skills and sponsoring digital consulting services offered by non-governmental organizations. Our feedback system channels 66,000 inquiries a year to the right addressees and tracks them to make sure they get answered. Our statutorily regulated expert bodies represent special interest groups in society; the Youth Council, in particular, has bolstered its role in recent years. Local citizens' initiatives are also provided for by law, though seldom used.

The overall direction is quite clear: to lower the threshold for citizen participation even further whilst boosting its effectiveness. In terms of Sherry Arnstein's

“ladder of citizen participation”, this means moving up the rungs from “consultation” to genuine “partnership”. A working partnership gives rise to a new culture of collective decision-making and freedom of action, as well as actually altering existing power structures. Somewhere between representative and direct democracy lies the fertile zone of deliberative democracy, a decision-making process based on public consideration and debate. But the invisible power of preparation on which decision-making powers are based is also real, which is why participation in planning is every bit as essential as participation in taking decisions. In fact, co-planning might actually be an even more radical step than co-decision.

Participatory budgeting sparks debate about values

One key element of a culture of co-action is participatory budgeting, which, in various forms, has been used in other parts of the world for decades and has been tested and developed in Helsinki in youth services since 2013. In 2018, an expanded version of this procedure, called OmaStadi, was put into city-wide use for a €4.4 million budget. Participatory budgeting came to Scandinavia from the Global South and was readily embraced by Helsinki. The first call for participation drew 1,261 ideas, out of which 299 feasible plans were subsequently co-developed. In the autumn of 2019, the city's inhabitants selected 44 of those plans for implementation. In the run-up to the vote, individual citizens and non-political groups campaigned for their proposals and engaged in important, and sometimes heated, debates about societal values.

More and more people have a say in the use of public space

Many of the successful participatory budgeting projects concern the use of public space in the city, where priorities are changing as a result. The city is installing more basic urban furniture, such as benches and rubbish bins, in the streets, and trampolines in parks. Lawns are being transformed into wildflower meadows and urban gardens. A wide-ranging programme to promote cycling has been launched. All the voting results are accessible on the city's website.

Critics point out that co-development and other forms of interaction are slow and therefore costly. But that's the way it should be. It is precisely this slow pace and thoroughness which, ideally, will give rise to a new space perceived as being collective, a space in which public policymakers work together with private stakeholders and people from all walks of life: you and me, him and her, us and them.

Pauli Saloranta
Borough Liaison

Unit of Participation and Citizen Information

City of Helsinki

Pauli Saloranta (b. 1971) is an expert on citizen participation for the City of Helsinki and is writing his master's thesis at the University of Helsinki on participatory budgeting. He has also been active for a long time in neighbourhood associations and other non-governmental organizations. In the summer of 2019 he served as a “facilitator” for the Freiraum event (PS: Do we need to clarify here the Freiraum as Goethe Institut’s program?) at the Stoa Cultural Centre in Eastern Helsinki.

Translation: Eric Rosencrantz